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291926Z Nov 05

UNCLAS HALIFAX 000256

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SENSITIVE

FOR WHA/CAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CA](#)

SUBJECT: ATLANTIC CANADA AND THE 2005 FEDERAL ELECTION: NO SEISMIC
SHIFTS PREDICTED

11. Summary: With a federal election now called for January 23, our contacts see little change occurring in the Liberals' hold on most of Atlantic Canada's 32 Parliamentary seats. The U.S. and bilateral issues likely will not be major factors in the campaign. End Summary

12. Voters in Canada's Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland-Labrador and Prince Edward Island) are not expecting to see much change in the regional lineup after the January 23 federal election. As the campaign starts to unfold, the Liberals will be looking to defend the 22 of the 32 seats they now have in the region, with the Conservatives seeking to add to the seven they have and the New Democrats hoping to pick off a falling Liberal or two to add to their current three seats. A drastic change in seat allocation seems unlikely given that regional polls show the federal Liberal party is still the favorite among Atlantic Canadians, followed by the Conservatives, and with the NDP in third place. As with the 2004 campaign, voters are still wary of Stephen Harper and the Conservatives, viewing them as too closed-minded and too focused on western Canada, both perceived being to the detriment of the Atlantic region. The NDP continues to be viewed as the traditional third party, and one which still needs to work on establishing a presence in many constituencies throughout the region.

13. Key issues for the region, as always, will be the economy and jobs. Management of the fishery will be a factor in Newfoundland-Labrador. National unity has also been mentioned by some of our contacts as a potential issue, since the prospect of the Bloc Quebecois taking even more Quebec seats tends to reinforce Atlantic Canadian feelings of isolation. Other than routine shots about the rise of "American style" anything -- campaigns, health care, you name it -- we do not at this point see the U.S. or bilateral issues as major factors in races in this part of the country.

14. Despite the sentiment that there will be little change in the configuration of the 32 seats after January 23, there are some interesting contests starting up. In Nova Scotia, there will be lots of attention on the Halifax riding to see whether the Liberals can come up with a strong contender to go up against the NDP incumbent and former national leader Alexa McDonough -- not an easy task given that prevailing sentiment is that the seat is Alexa's to keep. Over in New Brunswick the campaign there seems to be more exciting given a long-standing tiff between the federal Liberal MPs and Conservative Premier Bernard Lord over federal funding for several projects. Observers say the squabble could spill over into the election campaign. Some Conservative strategists believe these bad feelings could topple at least two Liberal MPs including Indian and Northern Affairs minister Andy Scott. Prince Edward Island is looking like it will keep its same four Liberals although the Conservatives believe they might stand a chance of knocking off Charlottetown's Shawn Murphy who represents PEI in the Martin government. (In a strange alignment of duties, PEI MP Joe McGuire, the minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunity Agency, is not responsible for the province, Murphy is.) In Newfoundland-Labrador there are no indications that much will change in the configuration of that province's seven seats. The Liberals are expecting to hold their current five, but the Conservatives are hoping that the retirement of Cabinet Minister John Efford will open the door for them to add his Avalon riding to their total.

15. Comment: At this stepping off point the pundits see little change in Atlantic Canada's MP lineup following the January 23 election. However, there is always the cautionary note that a lot of things can happen in the next two months. The parties all view the region as an important battleground with each seat vitally important. Consequently, we can expect to see lots of attention on key ridings where a relatively few votes will make a difference. One regional columnist, with a cynical viewpoint, remarked that the voters here "will be wooed obscenely as long as there is the possibility that the region's help will be needed to form a government." Recent federal spending announcements for the region have been flowing freely, indicating that the wooing has already started. End comment.

